

CHURCH STUFF

(A newsletter for Catholic cadets)

Week of 12 January, 2003

To my Catholic brothers and sisters in the Corps:

Welcome to 2003!

Hope that your Break was a good one and that you had a chance to relax and enjoy life a bit.

Being back at the grindstone might not be the most attractive option in the world, but if you look at it positively, the following prayer might be apropos:

O God,
help me to believe in BEGINNINGS
and in my BEGINNING again.

I've known death and birth.
I've been brave and scared.
I've hurt, and I've helped.
I've been honest, and I've lied.
I've destroyed, I've created.
I've been with people, I've been lonely.
I've been loyal, I've betrayed.
I've decided, I've waffled.
I've laughed, and I've cried.

You know my frail heart
and my frayed history.

Help me to believe in BEGINNINGS,
to make a BEGINNING,
to be a BEGINNING,
so that I may not just grow OLD
but grow NEW,
NEW in this wild amazing life
which You've called me to live...
with the BEGINNINGS that Jesus had.

Hope your new BEGINNING of 2003 was a good one and that you can make a new BEGINNING every day of your lives.

THINGS CATHOLICS CAN DO:

CANDLEMAS DINNER

Fr. Jerry, Fr. Vince and I want to invite all of you to dinner. Every year at this time, we have a very informal dinner for any and all Catholic cadets down at Ike Hall. It's free, and it's always a good time. This year, it'll be on 3 February...and as we get closer, I'll get more details for you.

IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR CATHOLIC READING:

You might check out these websites to order books, etc:

www.AmericanCatholic.org

(A Catholic publishing company), and

www.stjudeshop.com

(Large Catholic supply house near Phila...

I've dealt with them in the past, and they have a lot of books, pamphlets, etc.)

DID YOU KNOW?

We're still in the CHRISTMAS SEASON, believe it or not...at least in the Roman Catholic tradition.

It might be hard to understand, especially since CHRISTMAS itself has come and gone...and the commercial hoopla which pervades so much of our culture is already talking about Spring...

Nevertheless, in the Church Calendar, the CHRISTMAS SEASON lasts until the Feast of the BAPTISM OF THE LORD (this coming Sunday).

And the season includes much more than just the CHRISTMAS event.

It also includes the EPIPHANY (last Sunday) as well as the BAPTISM OF JESUS.

But let's talk about EPIPHANY, which has injected so much into our picture of CHRISTMAS.

It's a feast which is celebrated in both Eastern and Western Churches in the Catholic tradition, and we think of it as "The Feast of the Three Kings" (see Matthew 2:1-12).

The trouble is, if you read the story, you discover that Matthew never mentioned "kings", nor did he mention the number "three".

All he said was that "magi" (astrologers) from the East discovered a newly-rising star and journeyed to Jerusalem to find the Messiah. The Jewish scholars directed them to Bethlehem (based on a prophecy by the Old Testament prophet Micah), where they found Jesus and presented him with three gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Then they left, and you never hear about them again.

Where did we get all the additional details?

And why is this day celebrated on or around 6 January (sometimes called "Little Christmas")?

No one knows the exact reason, but there's evidence that in Egypt, the first days of January were kept as a kind of pagan "Winter Festival", commemorating the appearance of "Aion" (god of time and eternity) among the people.

The early Egyptian Christians decided to celebrate Christ's birth as a way of attracting attention to their belief in Jesus. Evidence of this can be found as early as the 3rd century.

Eventually, their celebration found its way into Gaul (France) and came up against 25 December - which was already being celebrated as "Christmas" in Rome.

So the Church adopted both feasts, making 25 December a commemoration of Christ revealing himself to the Jewish people (personified by the shepherds)...and making 6 January a commemoration of Christ revealing himself to the non-Jews (personified by the magi).

From that point on, EPIPHANY (the word is Greek, and it means "a showing" or "an appearance") grew in popularity.

A 3rd-century Christian writer - Origen - decided that since there were three gifts, there must have been three magi.

By the 6th century, the belief grew up that these guys were actually "kings" (that idea grew because of a literal interpretation of Psalm 72:10, which reads:

The KINGS of Tarshish and the Isles
shall offer gifts;
the KINGS of Arabia and Seba
shall bring tribute...)

And by the 8th century, the Venerable Bede (an English Catholic monk-historian) was repeating the legend that the three "kings" had specific names and racial characteristics: Melchior was supposedly an old white man with a long white beard, and he bore the gift of gold; Caspar was a young man of darker coloring, and he brought the incense; and Balthasar was a black man, who brought the gift of myrrh.

So, these "kings" came to represent the three major races of humanity (according to the 8th-century interpretation).

In 1164, the German Emperor Frederick Barbarossa dug up three graves in the cathedral of Milan - graves which had been venerated as the graves of early martyrs - and he moved them to the cathedral of Cologne. Popular belief claimed that these bodies were those of the "Three Kings", and people still make pilgrimages there. If you went there (Cologne) today, you could still see the monument in the cathedral...but most scholars don't believe that the "magi" are buried there.

In the 1200s, Marco Polo made his famous trip through Asia, and in his journal, he recorded arriving at a village in Persia where the villagers claimed the the original magi had come from that village.

So, the story has captured popular imagination throughout the centuries.

By the High Middle Ages, the Feast of EPIPHANY was being celebrated with much of the same intensity as CHRISTMAS. Gifts were exchanged, and feasting was held.

The German Catholics had a special cake called "Dreikoenigskuchen" (literally, "three kings' cooking"), and the French Catholic had "les gateaux des rois" ("the cakes of the kings"). These were cakes into which a valuable ring was inserted. The one who got the piece of cake containing the ring was "king" for the day and allowed to keep the ring.

On EPIPHANY, there were plays and dramas at the cathedrals. These plays told the story of the "Three Kings" and became a part of the Mass. They were discontinued when they became too boisterous: the characters playing King Herod (the villain) went to great lengths to depict the evil king as demented, and there are stories of sanctuary-furniture being broken up and spectators being attacked by these characters. The dramas were later moved outside the main doors of the cathedrals.

So the Feast of the EPIPHANY has a long and colorful history in Catholicism, but essentially, it commemorates a sense of "revelation": Christ reveling himself to non-Jewish people, with the underlying message that "Christ is not just for a particular group of human beings; Christ is for EVERYONE".

It's basically the whole message of CHRISTMAS itself.

PLEASE REMEMBER IN YOUR PRAYERS

...CDT James Gibson '04, who was injured over Break and is in a hospital in Abilene.

...all the military who have been deployed recently, and their families.

GOT A QUESTION?

Q: Father, I was wondering if you know how to prove there's a God. I believe there is, but my friend does not, and he wants reasons that are not based on faith.

A: I don't know of any human area that doesn't involve faith in some way.

Even the simplest human actions demand a certain exercise of faith.

For example, when you consult a timetable to find out when trains go from Garrison to New York, you're operating from a basic "faith" that the timetable reflects the truth of the matter.

I'm afraid that your friend is asking for the impossible.

When human beings talk about "proof" for something, they're usually asking for something based on observable phenomena that can be judged according to "scientific examination".

What we sometimes forget is that "science" refers to the material world and everything that's composed of matter. We're familiar with these realities, and we understand them because we're creatures of matter.

But we forget that we're also creatures of "spirit", and that this part of our personalities is not ruled by those same "scientific" principles. The world of the "spirit" is another level of our lives, and it's there where we encounter what I believe is the most powerful "evidence" for a belief in God's existence.

So there are no "proofs" in the scientific sense.

Belief in God is most convincingly based on one's experience of God, and it's quite possible that your friend has never had any such experience.

One can experience God directly - through God's power moving within the deep places of one's personality...or one can experience God indirectly through someone

else.

In any case, unless someone is open to the possibility, no experience of God will make any sense. It depends very heavily on one's willingness to open his or her "spirit" to the "world of the spirit". Most of us wouldn't have much of an idea how to do that because we're so heavily involved in the world of "matter".

To one whose spirit is open, something as simple as a sunrise speaks loudly of God.

To one whose spirit is open, the kindness of a stranger speaks loudly of God.

To one whose spirit is open, the miracle of newborn life speaks loudly of God.

We can't reduce it to scientific "proof", since the rules of the material world don't apply to the world of the spirit.

For me, the most convincing argument for the existence of God is the fact that from the beginning of recorded history, human beings have been conscious of the "need to believe". They've experienced realities in their lives which no "scientific" discovery could ever explain. They have tapped into the "spiritual" world.

True, most of our concepts of God are flawed, here and there, but that doesn't take away the Reality beneath the flawed concepts.

As the philosopher Wittgenstein put it in 1951:

Yes, the unspeakable exists. It manifests itself;
it is mystical reality...Even if all possible scientific
questions found their answer, the real problems
of life still remain untouched...The solution of the
riddle of life in time and space lies outside
time and space.

Hope that gives you something you can use in your discussions.

THEOLOGY EVERY CATHOLIC SHOULD KNOW:

ICONOCLASM:

Strictly speaking, it isn't a "theological" topic...but it's based on a "theological" principle, so it works for me.

The word "iconoclasm" comes from Greek words meaning "image-breaking", and an iconoclast is someone who goes around breaking images of things...like religious art and statues.

And this whole idea refers to a specific period of Catholic Church History (mid-700s), when there was a significant minority in the Catholic world who believed that having images of Christ, Mary and the saints was in direct violation of Scripture.

After all, the Jewish tradition remembered the First Commandment as it was recorded in both Exodus (20:2-6) and Deuteronomy (5:6-10):

I, the Lord, am your God who brought
you out of the land of Egypt, that place
of slavery. You shall not have other gods
besides me. You shall not carve idols
for yourselves in the shape of anything
in the sky above or on the earth below

or in the waters beneath the earth. You shall
not bow down before them or worship them.
For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God...

Thus, Jewish synagogues were very strict about not having any representations that could be construed as "idols".

And in the earliest days of the Early Church, those early believers preserved the Jewish concern that NO images be made - for fear of idolatry.

But as the Church began to spread into the Greco-Roman world, the attitude began to change.

The Christian believers began to view ART as an aid to worship. ARTISTIC IMAGES were seen as sources of inspiration, and a person became initiated into the Christian mysteries not only through "hearing the Word" but also through the eyes and through human sensibilities.

Hence, churches were constructed and decorated with works of ART, and artists were employed to enhance the worship-setting by carvings, sculpture, paintings, etc., depicting Jesus, Mary and the saints, as well as scenes from Scripture.

Crucifixes, icons, statues, paintings, stained-glass windows became an expected part of both Eastern and Western church-building.

But in the mid-800s, there arose an "iconoclastic" tendency in the Greek-speaking Catholic world. Byzantine emperors began to think that representations of religious figures were a direct violation of the Old Testament prohibition, and they began to encourage the wholesale destruction of any and all artistic works in Byzantine churches.

And so, crucifixes, statues, paintings and anything else that could be remotely interpreted as "idolatrous" were smashed, and this gave rise to the term "iconoclasm".

It took a General Council of the Church (II Nicaea in AD 787) to put a stop to the process of destruction. The bishops reaffirmed the value of VISUAL ART in worship, as long as it didn't become the object of idolatry. Statues, etc., were restored, and their use - as an aid to the spiritual development of believers - was encouraged.

And it was this restored approach that gave rise to the great era of "cathedral-building" within Catholic history from the AD 1000s to the Renaissance.

But with the beginning of the Protestant Reformation (1500s), ICONOCLASM once again became an issue within the Church, with the Protestant reformers emphasizing once again the Old Testament interpretation of the First Commandment. They forbade any statues, crucifixes, paintings, etc., in their churches, claiming that they led to idolatry. Because of this belief, many of the treasured art-works from the medieval years were destroyed in many parts of Europe.

So, Once again, the issue of VISUAL ART became a source of controversy, driving a deep wedge between some traditions of Protestantism and the Catholic theology.

The classic Catholic view can be summed up by a quote from a Catholic historian:

Since ALL nature has been redeemed,
ALL nature can be legitimately used
to attain to the world of the Spirit.

UNSOLICITED SPIRITUAL THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK:

"If we really belong to God,
then we must trust in God.
We must never be preoccupied
with the future.
There is no reason to be.
GOD IS THERE!

Mother Teresa

And that's the way it is, a day like all days, filled with those events that alter and illuminate our time...

and YOU ARE THERE!!

Hope the Intersession is going well.
Best wishes for the weekend.
Know that you're in my prayers.

Woodie